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Reposition

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Reposition

By

Ratna Khanna

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
In Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology
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REPOSITION

By

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ABSTRACT

Landscape should be an instrument of cultural force. This work contemplates the relationship between the artificial and the natural. It resulted from thinking about matters concerning my interactions with public space; the combination of nature and the culture we inflict upon it. By including “nature” here, I use it to denote an outside environment that includes biological activity that is untamed, yet still capable of being influenced by human agency. This human agency takes the form of culture, that which appropriates nature towards our social needs. Hence, this agency benefits the formation of landscapes. A cultural artifact such as an outdoor sign (and its position both as signifier and signified) interacts with public space. Through this fabricated object’s deliberate placement within the contextual landscape, it’s mirrored gaze only subjects what it partially reflects.

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I. Introduction

This visual project has evolved through my living in the foreign landscape of upstate New York. The genesis of my work has evolved from the specific experience of acquiring formal education in this geographic and cultural location into thinking deeply and critically about my surroundings vis-à-vis the resulting thesis. By living in the suburbs of Rochester, I have had a cultural experience unfamiliar to me. The process of experiencing this landscape—especially the civic disharmony it projects to the practicing image maker—made me rethink my creative work. This work emerged from thinking about matters concerning our interactions with public space, the combination of nature and the culture we inflict upon it. I believe this combination gives meaning to the term, “Landscape.” By mentioning “nature” here, I use it to denote an outside environment that includes biological activity that is untamed, yet still capable of being influenced by human agency. This human agency takes the form of culture, i.e., that which appropriates nature towards our social needs. Hence, this agency benefits the formation of landscapes.

In my thesis work titled *Reposition*, I investigate the relationship between a cultural artifact (the outdoor sign) and the landscape it occupies. The intrinsic nature of outdoor signs have usually presented themselves to be somewhat of an eyesore to the community. Through his wit, the American poet Ogden Nash voices his concerns with the billboard:

I think that I shall never see
A billboard lovely as a tree.

Perhaps, unless the billboards fall,
I'll never see a tree at all. ¹

The paradox of this complaint and the helplessness in how one approaches the problem of the replacement of the natural with the artificial is an interesting one. The artificiality of outdoor signs and the way we fill our surroundings with them is in direct proportion to our relationship with the landscape and our attitudes toward our landscape. *Reposition* talks about both the natural and suburban landscapes. Even though this entire body of work was shot in the western part of upstate New York, it is my intention that it considers landscapes that have problematically designed spaces. The outdoor signs in our landscape occupy various and generally high visibility locations such as highways, busy intersections and so on. The role of these objects as imposing or having a symbiotic relationship with the landscape is the one I am choosing to contemplate.

II. Geography

The Situationists used the idea of *détournement* as a way to reestablish preexisting aesthetic elements to subvert and rethink the original message, i.e., “[*Détournement*] employs more direct reuse or faithful mimicry of the original works rather than constructing a new work which merely alludes strongly to the original.” ²

Reposition employs a technique not like *détournement* but rather “a new work which

¹ Nash, Ogden. *The Face is Familiar; the selected verse of Ogden Nash* (Boston: Little Brown and company, 1941), 21.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Detournement>).

merely alludes strongly to the original.”³ It takes into account not only the artificial form of an outdoor sign and the message it displays, but also what it signifies within the context of the surrounding landscape. The radical art group Urban Blooz (figure 1.1)



Figure 1.1

camouflages or equates the billboard with a tree behind it. This representation of a tree on the face of the billboard alters perception the same way (figure 1.2) does. Urban Blooz’s public art aims to subvert the standard commercial aspect of the

message on the billboard and instead takes into account the surrounding urban environment. The two-dimensional image on the billboard acts like a puzzle piece of the actual urban picture in the background. The point of



Figure 1.2

view of the pedestrian’s position while looking at the billboard plays an important role, as

³ Ibid.

that is when the billboard playfully interacts to create a confusion in perception within



Figure 2.1

the pedestrian. The viewer's perspective of (figure 1.1) remains constant as the medium itself is a two-dimensional photograph. This allows very specific framing of the subject matter as opposed to Urban Blooz's public art. The experience of the pedestrian (in Urban

Blooz's work) as opposed to the viewer (in *Reposition*) is very different. The pedestrian's encounter with an actual billboard is an unmediated, first-hand, outdoor experience which allows the pedestrian to be influenced by other outdoor stimuli during it. This encounter is in continuous flux, whereas the photographs in *Reposition* are highly controlled and filtered through my specific experiential perception and then presented to the viewer.

Adbusters, Ron English and BLF (Billboard Liberation Front) are some of the organizations and artists who use détournement effectively. Their cultural commentary



Figure 2.2

is often satirical, anarchistic and humorous when talking about billboards; it is aimed specifically towards the message on the billboard and little to none on the landscape that surrounds it (figures 2.1-2.2). Whereas my thesis project, *Reposition*, attempts to take into account the cultural meaning

of these artificial objects within the landscape and investigates this relationship (figure 2.3)



Figure 2.3

In this image, the broken “exit” sign acts as an escape from the realm it represents. Thus the “exit” also acts as an entrance into another

realm, a freedom that is at once granted and quickly reclaimed. Notably, the word “realm” is used here to signify an idea rather than a physical space. Moreover, the geographical space in which it is situated is a park with trees surrounding it with a shed in the background. The location of this object enhances the idea of “exit.” The comfort and pleasantness of the surrounding landscape complicates the notion of “exit from where?” The park area where the billboard is situated provides a place of repose but also reminds us of the presence of the artificial billboard.

Shannon Ebner, a photographer, constructs large cardboard letters in the landscape and photographs them. The spaces she considers for photographing are sparse and look dilapidated. She effectively explores language as an attempt to “free” it into the open for it to be reconsidered. She constructs visual displays that incorporate



Figure 2.4

ambiguously phrased text, for example, “Sculptures Involontaires” (figure 2.4). This interacts with the surroundings to re-contextualize the meaning of the words the same way (figure 2.3) does.

Suburbs in America have

been regarded as a place of

escape from city life.⁴ Their infrastructure was historically designed to provide the worker in the city an escape to a place of respite from the busyness and toils of city living. However, this suburban ideal has deviated from its original intent into a place receiving much criticism today. American suburbia was built under the precipice of providing the worker an idyllic setting, a getaway, and once they returned to the city to face the workday, they were refreshed and ready to be as efficient a worker as possible. “Havens” were built on the borders of cities but the lack of civic art, the inattentiveness to the spaces between buildings (housing complexes, shopping malls and government buildings), lack of cultural institutions and repetitious architectural design gave way to a monotonous way of living.

Despite these problems, however, suburbia in Rochester, very much akin with American suburbia at large, has parks for recreational purposes. These Arcadian places

⁴ Kunstler, James Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 26.

have provided myself with a getaway from suburbia itself, similar to the original intent of suburbia as a getaway from city life. But the overlap of these parklands with the culture



Figure 2.5

of a suburban lifestyle do not always work together. This confusion faced by myself when living amongst a wealth of natural resources and lack of cultural enterprise in terms of a continuous and meaningful exposure

to cultural institutions is one that my thesis work contemplates. (Figure 2.5) was photographed on the edge of Highland Park in Rochester. This park exists on the edge of the city center and presents itself not only as combining a residential neighborhood (within its geographical context) with a natural setting but also both the city dweller and suburbanite a refuge. It holds a water reservoir and is host to a seasonal festival and theatrical events. This place to me has often represented a space that welcomes cultural encounters within a park setting. Acting as a bridge between the cultural and the natural, the park in itself is a haven, but the greater city that surrounds it is problematic. Classified as a tree garden, it was important for me to include branches in the composition of this photograph. Monochromatic and ominous, the mood of the photograph is reflective of the journey and approach I must take to this park I often visit.

Clearly not showcasing the natural wonders of this park, I chose to photograph in a way which hinted at flora but rather specifically stressed on the cloudy sky and electricity wires.

James Howard Kunstler, a major critic of America's history and treatment of urban planning and design (and himself a resident of upstate New York), speaks of the "ugliness" of urban and suburban dwelling, of how this landscape is devoid of focal points of visual interest. In his book, *The Geography of Nowhere*, his condemnation of American land use and sarcastic tone underline the problem of suburbia. He says that "American land law was predicated on the paramount principle that land was first and



Figure 2.6

foremost a commodity for capital gain.”⁵ He goes on to further suggest that there is no sense of civic art and hence this cheapens the landscape. The car culture in America promotes suburban sprawl according to Kunstler. (Figure 2.6)

combines the object (the billboard as a medium of advertising and thus an instrument for capital gain) and the landscape (the cars in the background). The image on the face of the object is a remediated reflection of the surrounding landscape; it is intentionally

⁵ Kunstler, James Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 26.

manipulated by using photo editing software. This artifice still uses the symbolic quality of billboards as it purposefully points out the complexity of the relationship between the billboard and the surrounding landscape. While Rochester, in contrast to cosmopolitan urban centers such as LA and Atlanta where the issue of city life is overrun by a car culture, is not economically or culturally their equal, it provides a city experience that is not congested and has places (e.g. Highland Park) as relief. It is the potential of this city at large that throbs towards a drab suburban existence with a lack of city-like cultural experience of which I am concerned about here. Another medium I would like to reference here is nineteenth century painting and the idea of the American sublime. This building apprehension towards a vast nation fulfilling its promise of settlement was questioned by a literary and art historical canon. Before the nineteenth century in America, there was very little American art or literature. Writers like Henry David Thoreau and painters like Thomas Cole were at the forefront of this Romantic period and sought to champion the ideals of nature and wilderness. This came at a time when America was undergoing its industrial transformation. They believed that wilderness was the seat of all transcendent values (of godliness) and so with the juggernaut of settlement and industrialization they tried to determine that American wilderness was the repository of the sublime. Their interest in romanticism and this notion of secular faith in spiritual beliefs was gained from contemplating natural beauty. Thoreau lived at Walden Pond which was situated at the outskirts of Boston in Massachusetts. While living here he wrote *Walden*. He contrasts and compares the meditative aspect of living at Walden Pond with that of city life and compares the artificial with the natural by way

of comparing the sound of a train whistle to natural sounds. Thomas Cole painted the

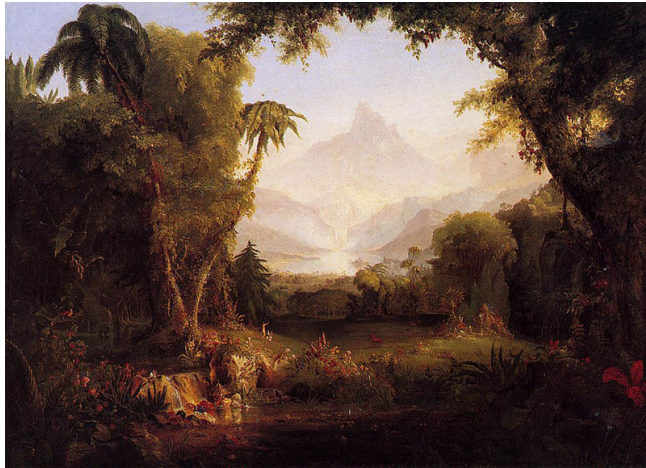


Figure 3.1

American landscape (figure 3.1) in allegorical terms. The painting, *The Course of Empire*, pictures the rise and fall of the Roman empire in five canvases. This series shows the destruction of the Roman empire from a stormy wilderness to an

Augustan City of huge temples, to the fiery destruction of the city and finally to a peaceful city in ruins overwrought by vines and creepers with no people. Thomas Cole was very apprehensive about the changing America, and his paintings of the sublime posed as a warning to Americans (as shown in this painting) of the material greed and the downfall from such a vice. To him, the



Figure 3.2

comfort gained from the abode of nature as a safe, warm, green and sheltering realm remained an antidote to the new place called the industrial city.

Reconsidering Cole
in the light of recent social

concern for the environment and the preservation of those very ideas that both Thoreau and Cole talked about (holding on to the already existing present while questing for the sublime) is relevant to the mood of today. The sublime cannot be reached abstractly with writing or painting alone; it is a physical space of which these artists talked about. The contradiction of attaining the sublime while still trying to preserve the past is intrinsic to the concerns of today as well. While there remains a growing concern for the environment, humanity still strives for development and discovery and often this means putting natural resources through a vulnerable stage. (Figure 3.2), when compared with *The Course of Empire*, connotes the idea of this primacy of untamed nature with the tree and branches taking over the entire composition including the billboard-object. The monolithic billboard-object can be equated with the Augustan city and the tree's branches with the vines and creepers. Both images show no human presence.

III. The Billboard and Illusion

I started my thesis with designing and building an object and think it is necessary to speak about the process. The object I designed and built is a derived form of the billboard. The first (in a series of five) was fabricated as a sculpture. It was meant to stand in a gallery space with a message on it. The smallness of this billboard object was initially conceived to stand in contrast with the “big” message across it. The importance of this was to deny the rights of a billboard as a large, imposing sign and to ridicule it by drastically reducing its size and positioning it in a gallery setting as an art object. This

object then grew into five in a series, and I then decided to use it as a prop in photographs rather than as a sculpture. The illusion of it as part of a photograph rather than a sculpture was far more convincing and effective. I chose the description of a billboard (when designing) as it is symbolic of outdoor advertising and is invasive, prodigious and artificial in nature. I use the terms “billboard” and “outdoor sign” interchangeably because the objects I have photographed are neither billboards nor outdoor signs; they do not function as either. They are, however, metaphorically linked to these objects that proliferate throughout our landscape. These objects that I have built function as signifiers. They signify a deep and significant relationship between nature and culture that transforms our landscape. As W.J.T. Mitchell writes:

Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a presented and represented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package.⁶

My thesis work was executed after considering these contemporaneous concerns about landscape, as W.J.T. Mitchell also considers the landscape to be a medium and not a genre.

Billboards are not naturally occurring objects in our surroundings, i.e., they have a purpose and are thoughtfully placed in specific locations. The billboard attracts attention through its size, placement and the advertising message it displays. The idea of building an object was conceived specifically through careful observation of the

⁶ Mitchell, W.J.T. *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5.

structure of billboards. I chose metal as a building material for two reasons. First, to imitate the realistic look of the billboard acting in an outdoor scene and furthermore, the weight of steel fixes this object in position in order for it to withstand harsh weather conditions. I have altogether built five billboard-objects to use in my photographs. Each one has a specific design and all are free standing. The portability and size of each object is of utmost importance as when building these objects, each one is no wider than fourteen inches, no taller than twenty inches and the heaviest of them is seventeen pounds in weight. The reasoning behind having five differently designed objects is to provide the viewer with aesthetic variation as well as keeping in mind the fact that actual billboards in the landscape differ in design and size, hence this adds to the illusion of the photographs in *Reposition*. Although these metal objects are welded together, small and handmade (as opposed to industrial manufacturing) the intention is for them to

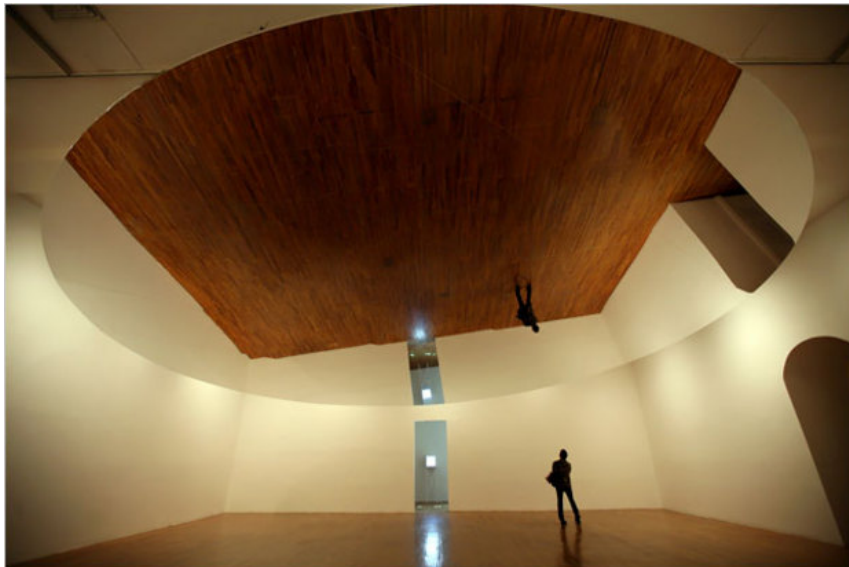


Figure 4.1

remind the viewer of a huge object and are photographed to create this illusion of scale. This size allows me to place this object at any location of my choosing and thus talk about various public spaces.

Most importantly, I have also chosen to place a mirror on the face of the billboard-objects. This decision was made after photographing the object, initially without a mirror, in the landscape and using photo editing software to manipulate the image on the billboard-object. The mirror acts as an illusory device, enhancing the game-play between the image and viewer. Olafur Eliasson (Figure 4.1) has worked with the idea of reflection by placing a huge circular mirror on the ceiling of an indoor gallery space. Within this enclosed environment, the viewer's perception of place and self is continuously shifting. This mirror, forty feet in diameter and weighing one thousand pounds, is mounted at an angle and rotates at one revolution per minute. This results in destabilizing the viewer's perception of space as they move beneath the mirror. The mirror as used in *Reposition* is also inclusive of the viewer and acts as a metaphorical reminder; the making of meaning in nature is through the actions of human agency's changing perception. The billboard-landscape relationship would not exist if it were not for the viewer. The mirror thus reflects the actions of humans.

Jacques Lacan investigates the mirror image as an illusion. He talks about the mirror stage as being a permanent structure of subjectivity in the relationship between the imaginary and the real:

It is in this little mirror, which shuts out what is on the other side, that the subject sees emerge the game by means of which he may - according to the illusion of what is obtained in the experiment, that is to say, a real image—accommodate his own image around what appears. It is the sum of these accommodations of images that the subject

must find the opportunity for an essential integration.⁷

In *Reposition*, it is our doing, our egos that are represented in the mirror, and it is always an artifice, always imaginary. Even though it is an illusion, it is not a lie because it is a simulation and not a conclusion of the relationship between the real and the imaginary. The illusion is possible in these photographs because it works in a highly absurd and abstract, yet believable way. The mirror as a reflector in the landscape works twofold here: it is a highly subjective point of view (through the deliberate placement and photographing of the billboard object) and therefore personal to my experience within that space, and at the same time a reminder of things overlooked or unforeseen within that space, literally reflecting a different point of view. Through this fabricated object's deliberate placement within the contextual landscape, it's mirrored gaze only subjects what it partially reflects.

Peter Zumthor, the Swiss architect, writes of building, "In a society that celebrates the inessential, architecture can put up a resistance, counteract the waste of forms and meanings, and speak its own language."⁸ The architectonic nature of the form of these objects in the photographic scene they inhabit interact with their often organic surroundings in a similarly meaningful way as architectural forms do. Through this appropriation I borrow the aesthetic elements from an actual outdoor scene to produce an imagined photographic scene that corresponds to the original idea (after considering the original space that is dedicated to advertising's effects).

⁷ Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated from the French by Alan Sheridan. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 159.

⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/apr/14/zumthor-pritzker-award>

The veracity of the photographs in my thesis work, *Reposition*, are immediately questioned. The deliberate fiction (and absurdity) of these photographs transcends reality in a way to overcome public space. Conventionally, traditional photography, as opposed to other art media, has a relentless tendency to keep presenting reality as the de facto reality. In *Reposition*, through illusion and artifice, I am forcefully aware of this imagined reality and therefore accept it. The “truth claim” in these photographs, as Tom Gunning puts it, “relies upon both the indexicality and visual accuracy of [the] photographs.”⁹ The positioning of the bus on the face of the billboard-object (figure 5.1) is where the doubt towards the reality of this photograph arises. The composition and color are both elusive and regardful, respectively, to Gunning’s claim.



Figure 5.1

⁹ Gunning, Tom. “What’s the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs”, (NORDICOM Review, vol. 5, no.1/2, September 2004), 41.

IV. Simulation

Umberto Eco's essay, *Travels in Hyperreality*, talks about how we re-create reality through realistic fabrications of it. The fabrications are an attempt to better reality. These photographic simulations in *Reposition* are a way in which I "better" my surroundings. Through the result of photographing I am presented with a changed version of what I come across in everyday life; it is more beautiful, interesting and fantastic. Eco, like Kunstler, denounces American landscape. He says in this essay, which was written after his travels in America, he is in search of "the Absolute Fake" in which imitations don't just reproduce reality but try to improve it. Through the production of *Reposition*, I have indeed simulated reality, like the fabricated cities in the Epcot Center in Disney World. Moreover, very much like Disney World, there is an underlying sales pitch involved. Eco says of Disney World, "An allegory of the consumer society, a place of absolute iconism, Disneyland is also a place of total passivity. Its visitors must agree to behave like its robots."¹⁰ Places like Disney World and Las Vegas remediate real life experience by giving people easy access and simple answers. *Reposition*, through its remediation, purposefully raises questions rather than provides easy answers about our experience with the everyday outside. As Jean Baudrillard states:

The objects are no longer commodities: they are no longer even signs whose meaning and message one could decipher and appropriate for oneself, they are *tests*, they are the ones that interrogate us, and we are summoned to answer them, and the answer is included in the question.¹¹

¹⁰ Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyperreality*. Translated from the Italian by William Weaver. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 48.

¹¹ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, c1994), 32.

Baudrillard contested the replacement of reality and meaning with signs and images.

One of the ways in which simulacra (signs of media and culture which create the



Figure 6.1

perceived reality) are different from reality is through the phenomena of urbanization, that is, what separates humans from the natural world. The work in *Reposition*, with illusion already

confirmed as its precept, therefore never identifies itself with simulacra and positions itself with simulation.

Even though in both *Reposition* and Disney World the differences between the artificial and the real are blurred, the message that is created in Disney World is quite different from the one in *Reposition*. The world of illusion that is presented in *Reposition* is cognizant of its illusory aspect (figure 6.1). Although the artificial object in this photograph is flanked by the distorted trees around it, it neither acts in accordance nor is it secondary to its surroundings; it immediately looks out of place and so do the trees around the object. Disney World promises that it can give us more reality than nature

can. Its Jungle Cruise ride promises a nature adventure through three different continents. During this you are promised to see animatronic snakes, elephants, zebras and exotic greenery (figure 6.2).



Figure 6.2

V. Note on Science and Politics

Neuroaesthetics is a new discipline that takes a scientific approach towards the study of aesthetic perceptions of art. *Seed* magazine, in their article, “Beauty and The Brain,” introduces us to new studies that are being developed that show how physical spaces alter brain function. John Williams, the senior scientist at the Wellcome Trust in London, suggests that the study of neuroaesthetics could reveal the underpinnings of conditions such as depression that are marked by reduced aesthetic sense. I am

interested specifically with Hugo Spiers, a neuroscientist at University College London, who claims that “when someone traverses a space, their brain produces an oscillating, rhythmic pattern.”¹² The article goes in answer to claim that “such knowledge of spatial cognition provides an understanding of the brain’s response to the built environment and can inform architects as they consider the aesthetic elements and function of a space.”¹³ *Reposition* talks about space and suggests an alternate reality. It does not claim to be a blueprint for the future but rather reminds us (and to an extent remedies) the problematic built environment. This new science may supply an understanding of images at a cognitive, biological level that will expand the social study of images themselves.

(Figure 7.1) shows an effort by Israel to strengthen the city of Jerusalem by



Figure 7.1

¹² Costandi, Moheb. “Beauty and the Brain”, *Seed Magazine*, October 2008, 14.

¹³ Ibid.

promoting its park space. Here, Palestinians are shown sitting amongst billboards as part of a one hundred million development plan by the city to promote significant religious and national heritage sites. Garbage dumps and wasteland are to be converted into gardens and parks to welcome the resident or visitor with signs and displays pointing out and educating them to important points in Jewish history. The display of images in the landscape (figure 7.1) enhances and cultivates this political purpose by the Israeli government. I, too, am deeply interested in following in this vein of the use of images for political purposes that specifically recognize public space as a means for recreation and education, i.e., not political propaganda, but rather a political purpose that develops land use into the creation of parklands.

VI. The Exhibition & Conclusion

The manifestation of this digitally produced thesis work culminated in seventeen prints in total. Fourteen of them were of twenty by thirty inches and three were of fourteen by twenty-one inches. Three of these were presented as a triptych. The triptych was presented as such because they were the only photographs that did not involve a mirror in the composition, and while they had a similar composition, the only difference between the three was the image on the billboard-object. The other fourteen photographs used a mirror in the composition. The editing of a large amount of photographs to just seventeen for the final presentation was done while keeping a few things in mind: first, to show the various landscapes of Rochester and its suburbs;

second, to remind the viewer foremost of a landscape familiar to them despite the previous statement; and third, the variation in the landscape in terms of the built environment, climate, terrain and flora. These photographs were presented in a gallery exhibition as a part of my thesis work under the title of *Reposition*. I chose this title as suitable for my thesis work to use here in a twofold sense—to put in a new or different position, and to adjust or shift one’s perspective. Hence, by shifting the location and placement of these objects in the landscape, I am also continuously changing my position and attitude towards it, and it is my intent that the viewer does the same.

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